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ABSTRACT

Presenting a portrait of a high school literature classroom, this paper gives a detailed, evocative characterization of what one particular and well-regarded high school literature teacher actually does in her classroom. The paper describes how the teacher-researcher chose a colleague whose experience and expertise were generally thought to be exceptional. The researcher conducted taped interviews with the teacher and the students, gathered lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to instructional units, and made videotapes of the classes involved. The paper concludes that the classroom observed was both teacher-directed and student-centered: the teacher direction was so skillful as to be almost invisible, and the teacher's organizational skills provided a classroom environment in which students actively engaged in the process of reading, interpreting, and criticizing texts. It was also observed that the teacher's focus on student-generated responses and questions kept the classroom discussion centered on issues of genuine concern to the readers. (RS)

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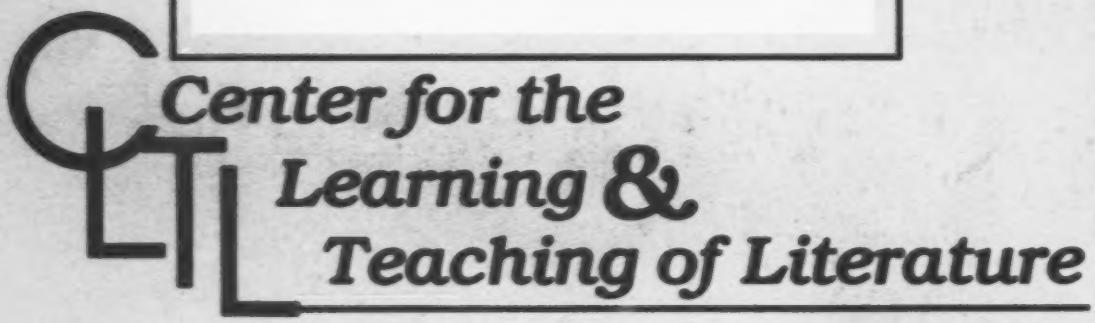

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Classroom as Text: Reading, Interpreting, and Critiquing a Literature Class

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Preface

Overview

The following portrait of a high school literature classroom results from a year-long teacher-research project planned and implemented by a group of high school English teachers from districts in and around Albany, New York. This portrait is one of six produced during the first year of the project, each of which is available separately from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature. The researchers are themselves all experienced professionals, regarded by colleagues, supervisors, and principals as outstanding literature instructors in their own right. Each of them undertook to observe an instructional unit of another English teacher considered to be equally accomplished in presenting literature to high school students. A unit was defined as the study of a novel, a play, or a sequence of short stories or poems over a period of four to five days. The intent was to compose detailed, evocative characterizations of what particular and well-regarded high school literature teachers actually do in their classrooms.

Each teacher-researcher chose a colleague whose experience and expertise were popularly thought to be exceptional. The researcher conducted taped interviews with the "master teacher," as well as with his or her students, gathered lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed, and made videotapes of the classes involved. Each researcher discussed and studied these materials with the teacher during the observation phase of the project and with the other researchers in the analysis phase. Throughout the study, the researchers also continually reviewed their evolving interpretations of materials with project coordinators. Finally, each wrote a narrative account of what she or he had seen and what its significance appeared to be, preparing the account through several drafts, until themes and details emerged that seemed to the members of the project team and to the master teacher to provide an authentic rendering of the classroom experience.

Goals and Methods

The question directing the research was this: How do the best high school English teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? Plainly, there are nettlesome prior questions lurking here: What does "best" mean? What are the criteria for excellence? Who gets to say so? What does "literature" entail? But the concern of the project was to find out what teachers who are perceived to be successful actually do, the ways in which they do it, and the explanations they may offer for their practices. The attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that might underlie perceptions of excellence were not an immediate concern, although the portraits that finally emerged of good teachers in action certainly direct attention to what the normal criteria of successful literature instruction are thought to be at the present time. Nor was the theoretically vexed question of what constitutes literature an immediate issue, though the texts that various teachers chose for their classes represent statements about what literature is thought to include in the context of high school curricula today.

The master teachers of the study were selected simply by appeal to local knowledge: The researchers, all veteran educators in the Albany area, asked themselves and others which local

high school English teachers have the most established reputations in literature instruction according to colleagues, supervisors, and students. There was no a priori critique of these public perceptions; instead, taken at face value, they were regarded as reliable indicators of the current, commonsense understanding of what makes for quality of instruction. The literary text that formed the basis of class work in each instance was the choice of the teacher or program involved, reflecting, at least as far as the project was concerned, the normal, current sense of appropriate reading material for a particular grade level in Albany-area communities.

The research question was restricted to focus primarily on how a successful teacher interacts with students in the context of discussion of a literary work during class. Hence, less attention was directed to activities such as reading aloud or lecturing on background information, for instance, except insofar as they set up and conditioned opportunities for class discussion. Nor was much attention paid to those portions of class time devoted to routine business matters, "visiting" before and after class, or disciplinary and other regulatory actions, except, once again, to the extent that they might affect the character of discussion.

Naturally, the question "What constitutes 'discussion'?" and the related question "When is 'discussion' going on?" were persistent concerns, by no means easily dispatched. Initially, the researchers were prone to conceive discussion in their own favorite terms, which for one meant little or no teacher involvement, for another involvement but not direction, for still another, lecture or controlled questioning interspersed with student responses. Eventually, members of the research group agreed that discussion was properly whatever a particular master teacher said it was within his or her own classroom.

Researchers and teachers agreed in advance on the units of instruction that would be observed. During preclass interviews, each researcher asked about the reasons for choosing particular texts, what the teacher hoped to accomplish on each class day, what she or he expected of the students, and what assignments would support in-class work. The researcher also asked about the teacher's views of literature, literary study, and teaching. Following these interviews, arrangements were made to videotape classes in which discussion would be a primary activity and to observe but not to videotape other classes in which lecture, reading aloud, or other business would predominate (during these sessions researchers took notes only). Interestingly, no classes featured more time spent on lecture than on discussing the text: student involvement of one kind or another was a consistent feature of the six classrooms. After each class, another meeting enabled the researcher and teacher to review portions of videotape, go over written notes, and discuss perceptions (on both sides) of what happened and why. The research group believed it was important to richness of perception that the teachers have the fullest opportunity to react to the tapes, comment on their practices, explain them in any way that seemed valuable, and react to the impressions that the researcher had formed of class activities.

Since there was no intent to evaluate or critique instructional practices or to view them from some other stance of privileged objectivity, teachers felt free to be candid about what worked and what didn't. Since the researchers were high school teachers themselves, they were able to display the perceptual judgment tempered by generosity that frequently characterizes those who have "been there" and who understand the obligations but also the difficulties of

classroom work. The researchers knew the teachers as responsible professionals; the teachers trusted the researchers to tell their stories honestly.

The researchers and project coordinators spent considerable time exploring the epistemological and hermeneutic questions that surround practices of observing and writing about complex human settings. Everyone acknowledged the necessarily interpretive nature of classroom observation, the influence of a researcher's perspective, the impact of a camcorder's presence, location, focus, and movement on what is seen, the selectivity and slant of field notes, the necessary but simplifying reduction of experiential detail to judgments, characterizations, and conclusions--in general the interrelationship between observer and object observed as it is finally constituted in the textual record of some experience. The aim was to achieve what Clifford Geertz has called "thick description," a narrative rendering of classroom reality, its ambiguities all intact, not a model, statistical average, or other purified representation of "what happened." The teacher-researchers shared a pervasive self-consciousness about interpretation, a desire to offer richness of detail in place of clearcut generalities, a concern for discussing "readings" of the classroom with the largest possible number of people (the teacher and students involved as well as the other researchers and the coordinators of the project), a determination to write narratives about teachers' practices rather than conventional research reports, an emphasis on "storyteller," "theme," "plot," and "character," more typical of literary study than of empirical research. In this instance, researchers and teachers collaborated to create stories of classroom life: their viewpoints converge and diverge in intricate ways which the resulting narratives do not attempt to conceal. The researchers are narrators who do not seek to render themselves invisible in what they write, whose voices are distinctive and important to the meaningfulness of the stories. The teachers and students are characters who come to life according to the ways in which they have been conceived by the narrators. Each story is organized--has plot--according to the themes that emerged for each narrator over the course of observation and talk. Following is one teacher-researcher's narrative. The others are also available as Literature Center reports.

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Classroom as Text: Reading, Interpreting, and Critiquing a Literature Class

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A literature class is different things to different people. To Karen Phillips and the principal who observes her, her class of eleventh grade English is most like a jam session, with each person in the room playing her own variation on the score found in the literary text that the class is reading. To one member of Karen's class, the class is most like an open session of Congress with each participant taking a position on the text and arguing for that position while listening to the opinions and ideas of the other readers in the room. Another student thought the class was more like a tea party, with no tea but a lot of tea table conversation. For me observing Karen's class, several metaphors suggested themselves as representing the reality I experienced in the week I was able to visit. At one time I thought the class seemed most like an athletic competition with the home team testing their skills against a new challenger represented by the particular text they were reading at the time. At another time, picking up on the language of a student in the class who continually referred to "breaking" things up and putting them together, I saw the activity of the class as similar to creating a mosaic or a stained glass work. But finally, after visiting the class, watching the tapes of the classes that I visited, writing my own reflections on the experience, and attempting to produce my own text in response to the classroom experience, I concluded that for me the literature class was most like a literary text which I must read, interpret, and criticize as I would any literary text.

This article is about reading texts. There are at least three texts to keep in mind as you read. There is the text of Ethan Frome being read by Karen Phillips' English class. There is the text of the class itself as I experienced it during the week of my visit. And, there is, of course, this text which you are reading, in which I give you my reading of the class. All of these texts are related, and you, the reader of this one, will find that you must also know the others. And then, think of it, the relationship among the texts is yet another text. Keeping all the texts in mind will give us an understanding of the process that we go through to find meaning through reading. It is this process that Karen Phillips is most eager for her students to learn.

To make sense of the text of the classroom, I am borrowing Robert Scholes' concept of "textuality" as comprising three related skills: reading, interpretation, and criticism. A brief description of how I am using each of those terms might be helpful.

In reading, a reader processes a text to construct a whole from the parts. Scholes says reading involves knowledge of two types of codes: generic and cultural. In this particular case, knowing the generic code means that I can only make sense of what I observed in Karen's class if I know in advance what an English class is. In addition, I need knowledge of the cultural codes to orient myself to the world of the class. I must understand the language and the customs of the class.

Interpretation is the activity that the reader is engaged in when she tries to understand

the meaning of a text. It is the process by which we make sense of what we read, by which we fill the gaps in the text. Scholes suggests that interpretation results either from some excess of meaning in a text or some deficiency of knowledge in the reader.

Criticism, as Scholes uses it, does not imply complaining about deficiencies or disappointments in the text, as the term might suggest, but rather an examination of the codes of one text from the perspective of another system of codes. You can criticize this text because of your experience of classes in English, because you are also an educator, or a concerned parent, or a graduate with your own expectation of what a literature class should be.

Scholes summarizes these activities this way: in reading we produce "text within text," in interpretation we produce "text upon text," and in criticism we produce "text against text."

For my reading of Karen's class, I followed the same procedure I do in all reading. First, I prepared for the reading by visiting with Karen and raising some questions with her, thereby coming to some expectations of the text I would experience. I have labeled this "Prereading."

I then observed the class, and, in the section labeled "Reading," I try to produce a text within the text of the classroom experience. Remember as you are reading that any number of texts could be produced within the text of this class. If three of us had visited the class and written our own texts in response, we can be quite sure that, though we would have some similarities, the three texts would be different. In reading we choose what to focus on, which elements to foreground, which to push to the background, which to omit entirely. This is one person's reading of Karen Phillip's English 11 class.

Prereading - An Interview with Karen Phillips

Before I read any text, I'm likely to do some previewing and speculating to prepare me for the experience. Before I visited Karen's class, I spent some time talking with her about what was likely to take place. When I arrived for our interview, I found Karen surrounded with books, dittos, and notebooks. Having known her for a number of years, I knew this scene to be typical of her.

If I had to give three words to describe Karen I think I would choose disciplined, organized, and efficient. Added to these she is witty, personable, and extra-ordinarily thoughtful. But to everyone who knows her, her organization is her outstanding characteristic. Even Karen's appearance is an indication of this. Her clothes are crisp and sporty, and always perfectly coordinated, her reddish brown hair is kept short and simple for easy care, and her slim figure suggests careful attention to diet and exercise.

The book opened in front of her was Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome. I began by asking Karen about her choice of this particular text to read with the class. Immediately she admitted to some reservations about having an observer in class while they read this particular text. Unlike other works they did in class, this work was not her choice. It had been chosen by the department for all eleventh grade students to read. Karen had some doubts about its suitability for the group. Her main consideration in choosing a text is its complexity. She looks for a rich story that is not easily understood and that lends itself to interpretation from a number of different approaches. Ethan Frome, she feared, was too easily understood to provoke deep

thinking and questioning. It soon became evident that for Karen a text that did not cause uneasiness in the reader and leave gaps to be filled in would not produce as successful a class experience. However, she was committed to treating this text with the "seriousness" with which she dealt with the "good things" she taught. I kept hearing in her comments a belief in the process of classroom discussion to find the richness in the text. Karen believed that the fact that Ethan Frome continued to be read and taught suggested that the richness was there. She was going to use all the techniques of response and analysis that she always used because, as she said, "I want us to find that in it."

Karen's comments raised many questions in my mind about the routine I would see in the class. She described for me a class based on the students' responses recorded in reading logs. Each would come into class the next day having completed a log for Ethan Frome that contained selected passages and their comments on those passages. Discussion would focus on the students' responses and the questions raised by those responses. Her role would be to facilitate the discussion and to be sure that all students participate, as well as to make connections and to suggest ways to go about finding understanding.

It sounded to me as if the teacher would have a hard time preparing for such a class, and I said so. Actually, Karen said, she found that she prepared in much the same way that many good teachers do. She reread the text and did all the activities she required of the students, including keeping the reading log. Beyond that she tried to anticipate questions that the students might raise and prepare some material that would help them to find answers to the questions that they had. Before her on the table were dittos she had prepared on some definitions of tragedy, some material from psychology and sociology books on relationships, an explanation from Northrup Frye of the archetypal imagery of the seasons. Her own reading suggested that these were areas that students might want to explore. If they did, she was ready. If they didn't, she would help them to find other material that would be appropriate.

All of this suggested to me that I was going to see a student-centered classroom, and I wondered what it might look like in action. Chaos was a distinct possibility according to Karen. Often, she said, students would get very involved in the discussion, and turn-taking and sticking to original responses gets lost while "crazy ideas" and heated arguments take over. While that might be undesirable to some teachers, to Karen it was an indication that students were truly involved in the discussion. What she hoped would not happen, but feared might, was that the students would try to be the "ideal students" in the presence of the video camera and sit quietly and politely and the discussion would not be as successful.

From my interview I had several expectations of what my experience of the literature class would be like. I expected to see a class in which the text was secondary in importance to the common reading experience. I expected a class in which the discussion focused on concerns raised by the students rather than on ideas suggested by the teacher. I expected lively discussion in which the students had a great deal of investment. And I expected to hear readings of a familiar text that might bring new meaning to that text for me. With those expectations I approached the classroom.

Reading - The Forward

Every reading contains in it some interpretation, I know, but in this section I will try to give you my initial experience of this class as I recall it without addressing yet the questions that it raised for me.

Arriving early in Karen's classroom, I had an opportunity to observe the setting for the class before the students arrived. Located in an annex of the building, the classroom is somewhat small. Most of the wall space is taken up by windows so that there is little room for black boards. The only board in the classroom is located at the back of the room, suggesting to me that it was not often used. (In fact I never saw anything written on the board all the time I was visiting.) Book shelves are mounted on one section of the wall. At the front of the room but facing the window rather than the room is the teacher's desk. It was clear that this teacher did not teach from her desk, and, in fact, I never saw Karen sit at the teacher's desk for any reason. The room is carpeted in industrial blue carpet, producing an atmosphere that is unusually quiet for a classroom. Around the room are hung cartoons from the paper or amusing posters. All of these individual elements contribute to an environment that is welcoming and intimate, quite distinct from the institutional atmosphere common to many classrooms.

It is hard for me now to separate the quality of the actual physical classroom from the mood that prevailed in it when class was in session. The quiet intimacy of the room was evident in the interaction of the students. Karen had told me that the students in the class were all friendly and that friendship set the tone for their classroom discussion. I certainly saw an acceptance of each other's thinking and a polite acceptance of each other's ideas that was consistent with established friendship. However, several things that I saw also convinced me that in spite of Karen's insistence that she was uncomfortable as the enforcer of order, there was an expectation for student behavior in this room that precluded any rudeness or intolerance of another's opinions. From the moment the students entered the classroom they were all business and cooperated instantly with all that Karen asked of them. There was always in the classroom an atmosphere of friendly cooperation and concentration on the task at hand. At one point, one boy who apparently was not prepared for the day's class began to look around while the other students were beginning a written response that had been assigned. Several students looked over and smiled at the boy at first, but very soon they were all hard at work at the task and he was left to pass the time as he could. At that point Karen was sitting at a student desk right in front of the unprepared one, and I noticed that she never looked up from her own writing or acknowledged in any way that he was not doing what he was supposed to be doing. This technique of ignoring the behavior that was not acceptable was the only form of discipline I ever witnessed in the class, other than the general practice of calling the group back to the task if they wandered off. Otherwise, Karen seemed to rely on her own and the students' seriousness of purpose to maintain classroom discipline.

With only 18 people in the room to observe, it didn't take me long to get a sense of all the characters. Karen had referred in the interview to roles that different members of the class had adopted in the course of the year. As promised, certain students soon emerged in the class to fill their expected roles.

On my first day in the class, Kenny was not even present but reference was made several times to what he might say, and at one point someone else asked if they could do a

feminist reading even though Kenny was out. In subsequent classes, Kenny often led the class discussion and he would frequently challenge or disagree with the speculations Karen would make about the text or about a student's response. His manner was always pleasant but confident, and other students seemed to enjoy and encourage his comments.

Becky, on the other hand, was much more earnest in her participation in the discussion. She raised many deep and insightful questions about the text and commanded the attention and apparent respect of the rest of the class. At one point when Karen asked the class to group the questions that had been raised, Kenny suggested that they fell into three groups: "yours, Becky's, and the rest of the class'." I have to admit that I watched throughout my time in the class for signs of irritation or resentment toward Becky from the other class members when her questions or comments would seem to monopolize the class, but aside from some glazed looks I never saw any such sign. Clearly any intolerance of another's contributions is not acceptable in this class.

Although the other students were not as vocal as Kenny or Becky, each of them (with the one exception) seemed to be fully involved in the work of responding to and analyzing the text. Eve's and Betsy's comments were especially interesting because they seemed to lack the reverential attitude toward the text that is typical of young readers. They were more willing to raise questions that dealt with surface issues, and they seemed to discuss the novel the same way they would a popular movie or a soap opera.

Meg, Kathy, and Julie sat near each other and all seemed to take a writer's interest in the novel. At one point in her response to the text, Meg wrote, "I'm so envious of the way she writes. The words flow so freely." She then proceeded to read a passage of very appealing description of a childhood memory of her own, that she had written in response.

Monica, Erin, Claire, and Kurt were more active in small group work than in full class discussion. The same is true of two boys named Sam (sometimes called the Sam team). They seldom spoke in the large group but were evidently paying close attention to everything that happened and worked very well on small group and individual tasks.

Troy is the closest to a class clown I observed in this group. Periodically, he would throw in a witty or teasing comment that would get everyone laughing, and during the question raising he kept calling for a move to silly questions.

Karen's role is harder to characterize. She is a full participant in every class activity. She is a facilitator of the discussion. But her role is more than either of those. If the class is a text, Karen's role is similar to the narrator of the text. She comments on the action, makes connections between incidents, sets the scene for further action, and explains those things which may be unclear. She talks a lot, but the talk is always in reference to ideas raised by the students.

The actions of this class were much I had been led to expect. The surprising thing to me was that the class kept exactly to the activities that had been planned. They read passages they had copied in their reading logs, they commented on the passages they and their classmates had chosen, they read their responses to a passage, they characterized the responses, they raised questions, they worked in groups to analyze those questions. All of these things they did. What they never did was summarize the plot of the novel or talk about whether or not they liked the

book. What seemed to matter was their ability to make meaning from the text and to use it to develop and express their own thinking. Anyone who has ever heard a high school football team watching and analyzing films of their games will understand the concerns of these students. They want to exercise all their reading and analytical skills, and a good text for them is one that provides that opportunity.

Let me tell you now the story of this class--the plot, if you like--as I saw it unfold as the students moved through a variety of activities. I have numbered and labeled each activity as we might the chapters of a book to make them easier to follow.

I. Sharing Responses

The first activity of the class study of Ethan Frome was a reading by each student from the reading log. They were instructed to choose a passage that they had copied from the text to read to the class. The students could use any principle of selection to choose the passage they would read, but once they had chosen a passage they were to stick with it even if others in the class read the same. After a couple of minutes for selection each student read a passage from the text. Two observations were made by students on the passages. First, they observed that everyone had chosen a different passage; second, they observed that all but one of the passages read were pure description.

After the students read their passages from the text, they formed groups of two or three to look at the responses they had in their reading logs. In the groups they discussed the nature of each other's comments on the passages and chose together for each group member one comment that seemed most insightful or thought provoking. As the groups formed I moved around and listened to some of the discussion among the students. Each group seemed to be on task, but it was interesting to listen to the different form the discussion took from group to group. Although the students were told to form groups at random, they seem to have chosen to work with other students who shared the same kind of interests. In only two groups were the responses of the members of distinctly different natures. When the groups reported on their responses to the whole class specific concerns of individual readers began to emerge.

Judd had discussed in his small group the similarity he had found in the town described in the novel and his own town. He found himself paralleling the passages from the book with his feelings about his own town throughout his log. In the large group he read a passage that describes the deadness of the town in the story. But when urged to share his response to that passage with the class the most he would say was, "I talked about a feeling that the town was like Benson Heights."

Other students were less reticent in sharing their responses. After reading a passage describing Ethan, Jane commented, "I couldn't help but visualize Ethan Frome's soul as covered with cobwebs and dust, none of which was removed until Matty came along. She seems to have brought life and laughter with her."

Angie also responded to a passage of description of Ethan. After reading a description of the look on Ethan's face, she said. "At first this description made me curious. Did he really have a physical illness? I liked the way the narrator saw deeper into him, besides looking at the physical. After I read this I said, Okay, now I know what caused that."

Kurt, like Judd, responded to a quote about the deadness of the town. His response was, "I was wondering what exactly kept Ethan from getting away. It seems like the dead are cursing the living by wishing them to stay because they never got away."

Troy and Betsy both were affected by images that they found in the text. Responding to the same passage, they saw similar but different images. Troy wrote, "I think there is visual imagery here." Betsy wrote, "I kept seeing images of helplessness and how Ethan was trapped."

Erin and Eve saw the novel as a love story and were most concerned with the relationships between Ethan and the two women. Eve wrote, "Life is wasted for him. He hated his home as he did his life. Life with his wife is more wretched. Because he loved Matty so much, Zeena looked terrible in comparison." Erin agreed, "he feels his life is over. His life with Zeena is wretched and unmeaningful to him and he feels almost as if his life is over."

Monica focused instead on Zeena and questioned her treatment of Ethan. After reading a passage in which Zeena is critical of Ethan, she said, "This seems so harsh for Zeena to say to Ethan because he's always supporting her."

Like the passage she chose, Becky's response was most unlike the other readers'. Responding to the whole first chapter, she wrote, "I looked at what the narrator says about the information, because the narrator is the one who tells the whole story. The narrator is able to sense deeper meaning. He gives the truth, the most correct information. Others are his informants. I didn't like the way the narrator gave his own view while people were living there and they were natives and maybe it was their view of the situation."

Everyone in the class presented a passage and response when called upon except Bill, the boy who had tried unsuccessfully to distract the others from their task earlier in the class. When called on for his response, he began posing for the crowd, the type of response that is common to embarrassed adolescents. He began several times to attempt a statement, "It showed that uh... It gave a feeling of." It made Bill look real good on tape. Just as before, Karen's reaction was to ignore the behavior and move on to the next response.

After everyone had read a response, Karen suggested that those responses pointed to some of the things that they would have to talk about in the class. She asked them to take their responses before the next class and elaborate on them and try to decide how the responses might lead to a way of understanding the novel. From consideration of their responses and from the ideas raised in class, she asked them to come up with some questions that they think must be answered in order to understand the novel.

II. Raising Questions

At the beginning of the next day's class, the students raised the questions that they wanted to investigate in their analysis of the novel. They took turns suggesting questions that were recorded by two members of the class. Two things struck me as interesting about the process of raising questions. The first thing was the orderly manner in which the students took turns and listened to each other. Far from the chaos Karen feared might result at this time, the class kept strictly to the rotation suggested. The other thing was the evident familiarity of the students with the process and their enjoyment of it. They made several references during the time for posing questions about the inappropriateness of offering answers at that time, and they

asked several times if it was time for "silly questions" yet. The setting aside of time specifically for raising silly questions at first puzzled me. However, when the time came to ask the "silly questions" I saw that it was a very effective way of encouraging students to ask those questions that might be in their minds but which don't seem important enough to propose. During the time for silly questions I saw the most spontaneous exchange among the students during the class period. When Becky raised a serious question during the time for silly questions, Troy immediately called out "Not silly enough," and several other students chimed in.

The most interesting part of the question raising process came for me when Eve asked what color Zeena's hair was. As soon as the question was raised, several students who had said very little in class to that point chimed in asking about physical description in the novel. From that they began to shout several questions about the ways the characters were presented, and it soon became clear that the questions were not silly at all. At one point Kenny said, "We're such a silly bunch, aren't we?" To which Karen responded, "I know, you guys can't stay silly any length of time."

After all the questions had been raised, Karen asked the class to take some time and try to discover general areas of concern. While they were doing that she passed out the dittos on tragedy that she had prepared. Although the question of whether the novel really is tragedy had been raised by Becky in the question period, Karen started by acknowledging that she was "going to force one issue and say that I think that it is important that Edith Wharton did say that this is a tragedy, and in order for us to decide whether it is a tragedy, I'm going to give you some things to read."

The class began looking at the tragedy material immediately, and Kenny asked if they could do a whole group analysis using that material. The question was left for the class to decide later.

III. Small Group Analysis

The next day's class started with general discussion by the whole class of the definition of tragedy that they had read. After some consideration of the questions that must be addressed to analyze the novel as tragedy, a small group was assigned to do the analysis. The other students proposed general categories that they thought were suggested by their questions and would be fruitful in analyzing the novel. They recommended other approaches and models that they had used in the past to analyze other texts. These models were information from other sources that could be used to explain some aspect of the text (e.g., Erikson's stages of development might help to analyze a character). Some they agreed would be helpful; others were dismissed almost as soon as they were mentioned. The interesting moments came when students would hold their ground and argue for the use of a particular approach that Karen thought would not work or, on the contrary, when they resisted using a particular approach that she recommended. In most cases the will of the students prevailed, but in one case Karen really argued for the benefit of using Mead's theory of Significant and Generalized Others to understand the relationships in the text. (Apparently the class had used this model to analyze relationships in another text, but they didn't agree to try it with this text until they were actually working in groups and one group was dissatisfied with the approach they started with.) After looking at the questions and hearing the suggestions of the class, they formed six groups to investigate their questions. They grouped the questions into these general categories: 1) male-female roles; 2) historical/cultural setting; 3) symbols; 4) analysis of character; 5) tragedy;

and 6) interpersonal relationships. The symbol group were those girls who were interested in the style of the writing but, after a few minutes, they decided that they wanted something more concrete, and it was they who decided to try Mead's theory to analyze characters.

When the students moved into groups, Karen moved around the room talking with each group and suggesting things that might help them discuss the questions they had. Some of the materials she recommended were very specific models taken from other sources. For example, for the group looking at characters she supplied a simplified chart of Freud's personality theory as well as a list of common avoidance techniques.

The students looking at male/female roles in the novel did not want any help or any external material. They had decided on a way of approaching the question that they described to Karen. After listening to their plan she congratulated them on having made a good start and moved on.

The historical/cultural group were equally set on a plan for proceeding and Karen stayed only long enough to raise some related questions that they might not have considered.

When she got to the students looking at the definition of tragedy, Karen found that Becky had done her own analysis the night before and was explaining it to Jane. Karen spent some time raising questions about the reading and suggesting other aspects of the story that they might want to consider. She tried to encourage Jane to challenge Becky's thinking, but that didn't seem to be too successful.

The group on relationships were having the most difficulty, and Karen spent the rest of the period working with them. They had decided on some crucial aspects of the relationships that they thought should be analyzed but they didn't have a way of explaining what they saw. Karen went to her file cabinet and got an outline of Karen Horney's Theory of Neurotic Needs that she had used with other classes. The students had not seen the model before so Karen read through it with them and explained how healthy needs can become neurotic in some people. She called their attention to their characterization of both Zeena and Ethan as "sick." "Will this help make sense of that?" she asked. She suggested that it might, but that they might also find that their questions were too specific to be answered by anyone else's theory.

As the class period was about to end, Karen suggested that the group leaders assign aspects of the analysis to individual group members to prepare for the next day.

IV. Group Reports

The small groups met again during much of the next class period to finish their analysis. Karen told them at the beginning of that class period that in their reports they should try to show how their group analysis answered the specific questions that the class had originally raised. After the groups had finished their discussions, they moved into one large group for reports.

The first group to report was the one that had considered the male-female roles in the novel. The questions from the list that they had been given included: "Who was in charge in Ethan's home?" "Who was in charge in the other homes of the time?" "How did men and women of the time relate to one another?" "Are sex roles significant in the plot?" "Does it matter that

the author is a woman?"

In the group report, Kenny focused on a question that was of most interest to them as they looked back at the novel. They raised the possibility that the women in the story actually comprised together the traditional wife, with Zeena as the housekeeper and Matty as the emotional partner. As such they each control Ethan in their own way. The students found in this a suggestion that Ethan could not live without either of the women.

Eve reported for the group that had analyzed the characters according to Freud's personality theory. They considered the questions, "Why does Zeena make herself sick?" "Why does Matty deny her love for Ethan at first?" "Why does Ethan stay with the women?" "Why did Ethan and Matty attempt suicide?"

The group had found evidence of the conflicting forces of id and superego in all three characters. They also thought some of the explanations of behavior of the characters could be found in the list they had of common defense mechanisms. They explained Ethan's behavior in accepting his marriage to Zeena early in the story as an example of rationalization. In both Matty and Ethan they saw evidence of repression early in their relationship, and of a death wish later on. They also suggested that Matty's behavior at the time that she refused to face her feelings for Ethan was evidence of psychotic denial.

Claire reported that her group had found important cultural influences on the behavior of the main characters. They had looked at the small town setting of the story and concluded that the options suggested by some of the students in the questioning period (Why doesn't Ethan just leave Zeena?) were not options for a person in a small New England village in the nineteenth century. They also addressed the question of the importance of the winter setting to the story and concluded that the story wouldn't be the same in another season. When they struggled to explain what the importance of the season was, some of the other class members suggested that feelings of isolation, death, and depression were brought into the story by the winter setting.

Jane reported for the group (herself and Becky) who had looked at Ethan Frome as a tragedy. It was interesting that Jane was the spokesperson since her report was clearly the same analysis that Becky had worked out the night before the group had even met. Again, Karen and some students tried to raise problems with the reading of the novel as an example of tragedy in Aristotle's sense, but Jane seemed to hold fast to the reading that she and Becky had discussed together.

The longest discussion resulted from the report of the group that had analyzed the relationships among the three characters. Their report came out of Erin's observation in class that they did not have any good way to analyze the relationships. Why did the characters behave as they did to each other? From the theory of neurotic needs that they had read they concluded that all three of the characters were using the others in ways that were not healthy. They argued that none of them was capable of living an independent existence. Some students questioned their reading of Matty as needing both Zeena and Ethan to take care of her, and they thought that they ought to go back to the text to see if there were support for such a reading. Of all the reports, this one sparked the most discussion as students raised a number of incidents from the story to see what motivation could be found. Some of the speculations were pretty far fetched (e.g., someone questioned whether Matty really hoped Ethan would be killed

in the accident to get him out of her way), and the group concluded that that couldn't be supported by the text.

V. Re-Symbolization

When the group reports and discussion were over the students were left with a variety of perspectives on the novel, but no single interpretation of what it means. They then met with Karen in small groups to talk about ways they might take to pull their thinking on Ethan Frome together. Some of them suggested ideas of their own that they would like to pursue. One girl, Eve, had a suggestion from her mother, who had read the novel along with her. The list of topics below shows the freedom the students had in deciding for themselves how best to make sense of this reading experience.

Final Writing Assignment on Ethan Frome

1. Go back to the initial reading log which you kept as you read the novel. Look again at your choice of passages to quote and at your responses. You may find that these support or undercut any of the interpretations of the novel which we have offered in class. You may find that they suggest a different interpretation. Begin with them.

   You might also wish to analyze the nature of your response to the passages. If you do this, be sure that your writing also involves an analysis of the novel, some personal understanding of it and of your method of responding to it.

2. Go back to your original questions about the novel. Decide how best to answer one (or more than one if they are related), and develop that as an analysis.

3. You may take any of the approaches which we have discussed in class and develop it as a means to interpret the novel. Remember that the approach is a tool to be used to help you understand what we have identified as the key questions about the novel which we have agreed lie in the area of the motivation of the characters in their relationships with one another.

4. (For Julie) Explore the symbols in the novel, again in an effort to understand the larger issues in the novel.

5. Compare the novel to other works. Suggestions: Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of a Hired Man," Simon and Garfunkel's song, "The Sound of Silence," or the Doors' song, "The End."

6. (Courtesy of Eve's mother) Write an account of part of this story from Zeena's point of view or from Matty's point of view. If you choose this, limit yourself to some clearly defined part of the novel to present in the other viewpoint; otherwise, you will have far too much to present.

7. Do-It-Yourself Writing - See me outside of class to discuss your idea or write me a description of what you intend to write.

8. Compare and contrast two interpretations of the novel in order to show how one is more useful in making meaning of this particular work.

Interpretation - Making Sense of the Text

All of the preceding material constitutes my reading of the English 11 class. Now let me try to show you the process by which I began to make sense of the experience for myself. Karen had told me that in interpreting texts with her class she asks them to try to take several stances. She has them question the text from a formalist perspective, a psychological perspective, a historical/cultural perspective, and a mythological/archetypal perspective. Let's look at the text of this class from some of those same perspectives to see what we find.

Formalist Analysis

One basic tenet of formalist criticism, as identified by Cleanth Brooks, seems especially useful in trying to understand the classroom experience I have described. Brooks and the other New Critics believed that the primary concern of criticism is the problem of unity: the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.

To address the question of unity in this class we might begin by asking ourselves what is the nature of the "whole" that is comprised of the parts I have described. Having sat through a week's experience with this class I have a sense of the whole experience, but to put it into words for you to understand, I had to break it down into its parts. We have looked at the setting, the characters, the plot comprised of classroom interactions. What is the whole which they form?

Put in the most general terms the "whole" seems to be a common textual experience. Each of those words tells something significant about the class. First it is common to these 18 people because of the open discussion and sharing in each class session. They begin with individual readings of the text, those readings that emerge from the reading log and are formulated for the rest of the group in each student's comments and questions in class and in the sections from the response journal which are read aloud. Once the individual readings are brought into the class and shared with the whole group they become other texts to consider in the reading process. From class discussion of all these texts a common reading experience emerges.

In my interviews with students I asked each of them how class discussion contributed to their understanding of the text they had read. Each of them mentioned the value of hearing other perspectives to help clarify meaning and answer questions they had. Claire looked at class discussion as an opportunity to get help from readers she considered more experienced or more perceptive. She laughingly told me that she tried to get into groups with students she thought had more to say about the book than she. In her embarrassed laughter I heard an acknowledgement that in some academic circles that reliance on others might be considered shirking or even cheating, but in this classroom, collaboration is not only allowed: it is required.

When I asked Claire what she brought to the discussion and what she got from it, she mentioned some specific points she had made in her small group, but she also referred in a light-hearted and self-deprecating way that was characteristic of her to her ability to raise silly questions that others would not ask. Claire's comments reminded me of my own experience of the "silly questions" as I'd observed the class. I was extremely impressed with the efficacy of this technique in opening up the discussion period and bringing more students into it. Up until the "silly questions" time I was very aware of the students' concern to pose "scholarly" questions. (Certainly the presence of a camera and an observer added to that concern.) But the move to "silly questions" changed the tone of the discussion and allowed the students to ask about anything that was unclear or interesting to them.

All of those shared activities we saw provided a "common" experience. It is a "textual" experience primarily because the focal point is an assigned text, in this case Ethan Frome. But in a larger sense it is a textual experience because of the process Karen has the students follow. Every classroom activity I observed was not only a textual experience but an inter-textual experience. At every step the students use one text to make sense of another. In the initial sharing of indicated responses about Ethan Frome, they discussed their own journals, after listening to all the journal entries, they recognized that description of characters and setting were most interesting to all of them.

In the question-raising session, too, students looked at the questions they had raised as an indication of the gaps in the text. As I listened to their questions, I could distinguish some questions that came from deficiencies in the students' knowledge and others that seemed to result from deficiencies in the text. The first type of question might come from a lack of prior experience on the students' part. For example, they asked about customs of the time and place of the novel that readers familiar with Wharton's other novels might have known. Some class time was spent in locating Worcester and trying to decide what social and family roles would have been acceptable there in the nineteenth century.

The other type of question, resulting from gaps in the text, was harder to solve and was the focus of the small group activities. These were the questions of character motivation, Ethan Frome as tragedy, and so on. The recognition by the students of these questions that relied on the reader for resolution was an indication to them and to Karen of the richness of the work. In my interview with Meg, she continually referred to the value of being able to argue out a view of a text. For her a good book was one that provided plenty of room for argument. I was interested to see that Meg was in the group that originally planned to look at the language and the symbols in the text. When they abandoned that approach it seemed to be because they found no disagreement among them about the style or the imagery.

In the small group work the use of one text to make sense of another became most explicit. The groups started with questions they had raised, but to answer them they referred to material that Karen supplied from other texts. Some of this material (e.g., Karen Horney's Theory of Neurotic Needs, Freud's personality theory, and Mead's theory of significant others) came from psychology and sociology books. The explanations of tragedy came from more literary sources, Aristotle's Poetics and essays by Arthur Miller. This practice of supplying specific texts for the students' analysis is questioned by many teachers who use reader-response techniques because they see it as imposing other authorities (the teacher's as well as the sociologist's, etc.) on the student's reading and in some way negating the value of the student's own response.

I asked Karen about the use of these "models" to analyze literature. Knowing her goal to put the reading and the classroom discussion in the students' control, I questioned the appropriateness of providing such specific material for group analysis. Isn't the teacher taking control of the discussion by choosing the "models"? To my surprise Karen agreed. "To some extent," she said, "that's true." The important thing is that the models are supplied in response to questions the students raise and ones that they can't answer on their own. The purpose of the models is to make up for the lack of prior experience of the students. The teacher gives the models as tools for managing texts. It's important that the students are aware that there are many tools to choose from. That's what is happening in the class discussion that takes place before the breaking into small groups. Students brainstorm approaches that might work. "What have we used before that might work?" Some approaches (or models) are suggested and rejected; others are brought out for a try. In some cases, as with the "Neurotic Needs" model, the teacher will offer a tool that the students haven't seen before. After they've tried it this time, they add it to their folders, and it becomes part of their critical repertoire for future reading. The goal in providing models is not to impose a reading of the text but to supply a variety of critical tools that will give students greater flexibility of approach as they move from personal response to critical interpretation.

Finally, to understand the "whole" of this classroom we need to consider the nature of the experience. The most striking aspect of this classroom is the active nature of the students' experience. In this classroom reading, responding to, interpreting, and criticizing texts are activities students perform rather than something they observe or products they are given. Far from the common experience of students taking notes on a correct interpretation of a work that they will later feed back to the teacher in a test or paper, these students argue out, piece together, or otherwise construct their own understanding of the text through the classroom activities. Ann referred to this process as one of breaking the text down and breaking it up into manageable pieces and then each student putting the pieces together in her own way so that it makes sense to her. I asked Ann if it mattered that her final understanding of Ethan Frome was different from other people's understanding. She suggested at first that her interpretation ought to have something in common with the other readers' because "it's the same book," but she also suggested that an interpretation that didn't have something different in it would show that she had not done her own thinking.

Cultural Analysis

One other perspective important in interpreting this classroom experience is an analysis of the classroom culture. I'm using culture here in the general sense of "the way things are done here." It includes an understanding of accepted behaviors, shared values, underlying assumptions, and taboos. Let's look at each of these aspects.

My visit to this classroom took place in March. Therefore, the culture of the class was so well established that students no longer seemed aware of it. I have mentioned before the atmosphere of seriousness of purpose and mutual respect that prevailed in the room. Much of that, I know, came from the careful organization of the classroom. Karen had established from the beginning of the year a classroom procedure that enabled the students to move with confidence among a variety of activities and to take on any of a number of expected roles. When I visited, Karen had only to describe the task for the students to begin to do what she asked. Little, if any, time was spent explaining procedures or demonstrating expected behavior.

Having taught high school English classes for a number of years myself, I recognized that this smoothness was the result of clear and explicit instruction, of consistent expectations, of repeated practice, and of rewards for good performance. The early instructions, demonstrations, and practices were, of course, not visible to me during my March visit, but I saw enough evidence of the type of rewards used in this class to be convinced of their efficacy. Karen Phillips pays her hard-working students the ultimate compliment of taking them seriously.

Far from the glib and superficial "Thank you for sharing that" or "That's very good, Joey" that might serve to dismiss a student response while pretending to reward it, Karen's comments respond to the substance of the response. When Betsy raised a question of the color of Zeena's hair, Karen asked in response "Why would it be helpful to know that?" Betsy went on to suggest that there was little physical description of Zeena, a fact she thought might be significant. Karen admitted that she hadn't thought of that before but that if true it could be significant. I was impressed the next morning to hear her raise the question with Betsy again and point out to her some passages of description she had found. The final result was to refute the point Betsy had raised but to encourage the thinking and risk taking that Betsy had engaged in to raise it.

Many other instances of rewards for participation occurred in each class meeting. Sometimes the reward came in the form of respectful disagreement with a students' thinking: "I have a hard time seeing the narrator as female." Sometimes it was a compliment. When Meg and Kathy read descriptions from their response journals, Karen remarked quickly "Boy, you guys write well." I was touched to hear a quiet "Thank you" as Karen moved on to the next response; I felt sure that not only those girls but the other students too would keep trying to write well enough to gain that approbation.

I have remarked before on the lack of obvious punishment or response to undesirable behavior in the class. This is possible because the students have accepted and value the business-like atmosphere in the class. In a high school classroom where students are often more eager for attention from their peers than from the teacher, ignoring disruptive or uncooperative behavior can only work if the other students will also ignore it. In Karen's class that is just what they did. Karen said that was partly a matter of luck, but I think the more important factor was the other students had work to do; work that they believed was important and from which there were compelling rewards to be gained for themselves in terms of group interaction and teacher approbation.

Underlying these students' attitudes in class were some shared values. In my interviews with students one common value that emerged was what I've called "scholarship." Students all referred to wanting to think deeply, to understand ideas, to be able to express their own thinking well. It is significant that this class is called an "Honors" section in the school. When I mentioned to Karen that that might explain the earnestness and confidence they displayed, she said I might be interested in looking at some class statistics. The data she showed me (scores from state exams, and SAT results) indicated that these were not students of superior ability for whom academic endeavors were easy. Rather the scores indicated that the ability range was from low average to slightly above average. What qualified these students for the "Honors" section was their own interest in learning and a willingness to work hard. But having been designated as honors students they seemed determined to live up to the distinction.

Another evident value in this class was respect for other people. Karen's respect for the

students clearly set the tone and was matched by the students treatment of her and of each other. Each day that I visited I watched for signs of a class system or a hierarchy within the classroom, but I found none. In the students' comments in the interviews several of them mentioned that some personalities were more dominant in discussion. Erin suggested that sometimes Kenny or Becky might lead the discussion off into an area that was interesting to them but not to the class in general. She saw that as an unavoidable consequence of student directed discussion. When I asked if she thought the teacher should intervene to open up the discussion she wasn't sure that would be desirable, but she did think the "tangents" were often meaningless and annoying.

A less obvious value, but one I became more aware of by the end of my visit, was independence. This independence manifested itself in a desire to resist the authority of others' thinking. Frequently during the week I heard students question suggestions that Karen made for group procedures or interpretation. Sometimes in a discussion when she would paraphrase or expand on a point a student was making, the student would disagree and proceed to explain that he/she had meant something different. I recognize that this independence could only be a value in a class if the teacher welcomed it so that it didn't jeopardize the students' grades, and I admired the wisdom that Karen showed in encouraging it. Occasionally the tone of a challenge would suggest the playful competition more common among peers. When Kenny was reporting on his group's findings Karen broke in to explain an unclear point. "Oh, are you taking over this group now?" Kenny teased. To which Karen laughingly replied, "Certainly not, Kenny. You're doing a brilliant job."

What assumptions underlie this classroom process? From what we've seen I think it is clear that Karen operates from the assumption that guided practice in literary response and analysis will develop students into independent readers and interpreters of literature. At some points in this class the teacher guidance was very evident. When students would hesitate or begin to give up on a task, Karen would intervene. "Try this." "Have you thought about...." "One thing that strikes me...." At other times the students functioned on their own while Karen moved on to a group in need of help.

There is an assumption that the literary experience should start with an individual's personal response to the text. All the discussion of the literature begins with these responses and the questions to be raised about the text come from these responses.

Another important assumption in this class is that literature is best looked at from a variety of critical approaches. Students are encouraged to develop and exercise critical flexibility in their analysis of a text and to accept a range of interpretations rather than looking for the one "correct" interpretation of the text.

There is an assumption that the interpretation of literature is a social activity that takes place in, with, and for a community of interpreters. Each reader's interpretation is influenced by the thinking of other readers. Some debate among interpreters is likely to be involved in the process, necessitating logical thinking and presentation of evidence.

I know there are other assumptions operating in this class, many of them so subtle and unquestioned that no one in the room is even aware of them. From a visit of one week I can not say what these assumptions are. I know that there are some assumptions that determine what types of questions are acceptable and some that determine which responses are more

valuable than others. I tried to get a sense from the students of which questions and which contributions were more valuable to them but without much success. Meg suggested that presenting different points of view was most important.

I tried to observe in the class what taboos were respected. I have referred before to the obvious prohibition against disrespect or discourtesy. I am sure there must also be some taboos that limit the questions that can be raised and responses that can be made, but in my observation I did not see any evidence of them. I asked both Karen and the students if there are any questions that they would say were off limits or any comments that would be considered inappropriate but none of the people I talked to was aware of any taboos. Meg was especially insistent that everything was open to discussion. "We talk about anything," she said, "Everything is relevant and everything is talked about. Maybe a sexual relationship between two people and how it's affecting a third member or a special problem. Everything is discussed. No stone is left unturned. Everyone is allowed to state how they feel and argue their opinion. Everyone's contributions are valued."

Criticism - Putting the Class in Perspective

The final step for me in the process of finding meaning in a text is to look at the codes of this text from the perspective of other systems of codes. This step Scholes calls criticism.

I am aware as I sort through all my observations, interviews, and journal entries about the class that there are conflicting perceptions of the class among all this material. I found conflicts between the teacher's expectations and her observations after the unit was completed, between the teacher's perceptions and those of the students, and between my perceptions as an observer and those of the participants. Let's conclude by looking at each of these perceptions.

The least amount of conflict is in the expectations Karen expressed to me in our initial interview and her final observations after the class was over and she had viewed all the tapes. Clearly she knows her class well and predicted rather accurately how they would perform. However, some differences stand out.

In the initial interview I asked Karen what a discussion looks like in her classroom. She responded: "Some days it looks like chaos and that's sometimes distressing to me but most of the time it's my gut level instinct that it is from that chaos that the students really gain. When these kids, this particular class, gets on to something it's most likely that at the start of it 14 of the 17 are talking and we have to find a way to order that."

After looking at the tapes Karen was surprised at the orderliness. Some of that she thought could be accounted for by the presence of an observer with a video camera. "I'm afraid that when they're on tape their idea of it was the same as when the principal observes; they all sit and mind their manners and do the best thing they can for a teacher, which is to sit there quietly, and to me that is a mark of a lack of success because they are not involved."

I asked if that meant she thought this class hadn't gone well. Karen said that on the contrary she thought it had gone quite well. While there was a lack of spontaneity in whole class discussion, the small groups had produced some interesting insights into characters and social context that pleased her. Also, Karen noted that the papers her students wrote on Ethan Frome were as a group the best papers they had produced.

The other observation that Karen made in viewing the tapes was that she talked much more in class than she had thought she did. She decided that she needed to reassess her perception of her role in the class. In the initial interview she had suggested that she was a facilitator of discussion but something more than that in that she structured many of the activities. After viewing the tapes she saw herself as more actively guiding students through the process of response and analysis. Her reaction to that was that she needed to recognize that her class was more teacher directed than she had believed; but she spoke of that as a reality to be acknowledged rather than a condition to be changed.

The perception of the role of the teacher was the most striking difference in the students' perceptions of the class and Karen's. Each student whom I interviewed referred in some way to the teacher's importance in guiding their discussion and interpretation of the text. Meg said the teacher is the one who knows what ideas the class should look at. "She can say, 'Okay, let's look at this character, let's look at this event and how we can interpret it,' the teacher is more valuable to me than the text. She can explain and can help you to interpret whereas the book will generally just give you the story."

Erin's and Claire's perceptions of the teacher's role were less conscious than Meg's. However, in each of their conversations they referred repeatedly to the teacher as central to the process. Claire mentioned the teacher as listening to the ideas and helping students to decide on tasks and strategies for small group analysis. She also referred to discussion as a technique the teacher uses, "For us to work together and for all of us to get many angles of the story."

Erin saw the teacher as the person who was the final judge for interpretations. After the group met and worked out an interpretation, she said, "Then we tell it to the teacher." She also saw the teacher as the initiator of discussion. "Usually when Mrs. Phillips comes into the class she has an idea and she gets us rolling."

This strong teacher role was not what I had heard Karen describing as her function in the class. She wanted her class to be more of a community of interpreters, teacher directed but not teacher centered, and when I observed the class, I saw that she tried to participate in each activity. In spite of the difference in their perception of the teacher, all the students I spoke to did refer to Karen's participation in class activities. Meg's comments clearly showed that she recognized Karen's desire to be one of the group. "The teacher is not the sole contributor," she said. "I think she uses discussion to allow us to get different viewpoints. The teacher does generate a little more insight into the story just because she has taught it before and has had the benefit of many other people's ideas."

Erin also referred to Karen's participation as a member of the discussion group. In a discussion, she said, "We just get ideas in our head and we just say them and Mrs. Phillips does the same thing."

The question raised by Meg's, Erin's, and Claire's descriptions of class interaction was the central question for me in thinking about this class. Karen's discussion in the initial interview had emphasized the student centered nature of the class. All her preparations were aimed at getting the students actively involved in responding to and analyzing literature. My own observations of the class were of a process in which the students were, in fact, very actively engaged but in which the organization and focus of the activities strongly suggested

active teacher direction. Finally, my interviews with students after the unit was over uncovered student perceptions of the teacher as the key element in the class: the one who provides the focus, the guidance, and the evaluation of the class process. How do we account for these conflicts in perception? Are they really contradictory, or is it a question of each of us directing our attention to the aspect of the process that most concerns us? I think I've finally concluded that there is not a real contradiction in these views but an understandable difference in emphasis.

For Karen, moving gradually from years of teaching in a more traditional teacher-centered style to a student-centered class, the essential element is student involvement. She has set strict limits for herself as to the type and amount of help and direction she provides students. Yet, as a teacher with many years of experience, she believes that high school students need structure in which to operate most effectively. Her own words best describe her sense of the teacher's function:

"I start teaching a piece of literature by asking kids to talk about their reactions, their responses. I don't begin by saying I think we all need to look at the particular style of this author. I begin by saying 'OK, what is going on here? How have you responded?' But very likely I've structured activities to lead up to that so they have something to start with. I'm more than a facilitator. I have structured activities so students have a place to begin. I'm very often a collector of their responses to begin with. And especially in the initial times of chaos, I am the person who makes sure we don't lose things. I'll say 'OK, everybody be quiet. Kurt is going to say that again so the recorder can get it down.'"

"That is just the beginning. Then I guess I structure the process. We get a whole bunch of ideas down, and I say to the recorder, 'OK, will you go back through and read everything we've collected, and would the rest of you watch for what you think are patterns, what you think is more important than other things to lead our discussion to analysis.' And then I will ask questions. 'What do you see going on here? What does what we have here show us? What does it look like we have to deal with to understand this piece of literature?'"

"I have to be ready to help students deal with those concerns that come up. I have to be ready for anything, but I know a number of things that are going to come up not even because I know this group of students but because I read the same book. I know some things they will talk about. I have to be ready for those and, if they come up with something new, I find myself in the classroom saying, 'You know I have never thought about that before. I think it's a wonderful way to get into the text and we need to work it through.'"

"The teacher, like the students, has her separate response to the text. I am one of the responders, but I'm not only that because I'm the person who has imposed the structure, the structure in the sense of the kinds of activities that we're doing and the kinds of things that kids now know are expected of them. And I'm the person who is most likely to say, 'OK, now you have to go back to the text. We'll listen to any point of view you want but you have to have some verification in the text.'"

"I'm the one who is going to recognize when perhaps the discussion has reached the point where we have done enough and it's time to move on to doing something else. I may be the one who recognizes the student who's kind of peripherally interested and draws that student in. Those are facilitator roles, and I guess I take that role more than others. But they do still

look at me and ask 'what do you think?' and it's different from 'what does Troy think?' because Troy is just one of the guys. I guess I like the circle image with the text in the center and all of us readers around it, but I know my role is different. I'm not just one of the responders. I'm more than that."

Karen's description of her function as a teacher of literature made me rethink my understanding of classrooms. I recognize that I had in my mind a dichotomy between teacher-directed and student-centered classes. It occurs to me now that the two are not opposites. A class, it seems, can be teacher directed and student centered. I believe that Karen Phillips' class is just that. The teacher direction is so skillful as to be almost invisible, but her magnificent organizational skills provide a classroom environment in which students can be actively engaged in the processes of reading, interpreting, and criticizing texts. Karen's focus on student-generated responses and questions keeps the classroom discussion centered on issues of genuine concern to the readers. Her skill in providing the opportunity and tools for critical analysis moves them toward what Scholes has called "textual power."

Afterword

One common experience for all of us who love literature is the disappointment of coming to the end of a favorite text. On each reading I have longed to follow Huck into the frontier, to see Rochester and Jane grow old happily together, to help Holden discover some goodness and security in his world. Equally difficult was it to leave the English 11 class I had experienced for so short a time. On my last day there copies of A Rose for Emily were being distributed to the class. I longed to stay to hear what Becky would think of the narrator, if Troy would see evidence of Satanism, how Eve and Erin would like the love relationship, if Meg and Kathy would enjoy the style, how Kenny would explain the male/female roles in this society, what silly question Claire would find to liven up the discussion....

Bibliography

Brooks, Cleanth. (1951). The formalist critic. The Kenyon Review.

Scholes, Robert. (1985). Textual power: Literary theory and the teaching of English. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Videotape Studies of Classroom Discussion (a series of reports). Six teacher-researchers, working collaboratively with university faculty, videotaped literature lessons of English teachers perceived by their colleagues to be outstanding. Subsequently, the researchers wrote interpretive analyses of their observations. Each narrative is available separately.

2.2 Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher Research Project.
Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, $3.00.

This paper develops the theoretical framework for the teacher-research projects, and justifies such projects as an essential part of educational inquiry.

2.3 Taking the Fear Away from Learning.
Ann Connolly, $4.00.

In this case study of an all female classroom in a private school setting, Connolly describes instructional experiences that differ considerably from those experienced in her own public school classroom.

2.4 A Journey of Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade: A Teacher-Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom.
Tricia Hansbury, $4.00.

In this case study, Hansbury discusses the delicate balancing act every teacher undertakes in accommodating the needs and eccentricities of a diverse mix of students while still attempting to reach them all with the same class materials.

2.5 Being There with Kevin Tucker.
Carol Forman-Pemberton, $4.00.

This report discusses the subtle ways in which teachers size up their classes and distinguish among first, second, and third string students in the game of class discussion.

cs 2.6 The Heart and Soul of the Class.
David Marhafer, $4.00.

This report describes a teacher-researcher's struggle to understand why a teacher whose approaches are vastly different from his own is nonetheless successful.

2.7 Classroom as Text: Reading, Interpreting, and Critiquing a Literature Class.
cs Roseanne DeFabio, $4.00.

This report explores one teacher's conviction that guided response to literary texts ultimately makes students better independent readers.

2.8 The Teacher as Mentor-Guide: Joe Allen on Antigone.
Doris Quick, $4.00.

This teacher-researcher describes how the seemingly trivial or obvious questions students ask each other in a nondirected peer group discussion actually constitute a valid and valuable learning experience.